

Knapp drops plan to move Planning Board to Rockville

■ Silver Spring headquarters project is still on track

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Montgomery County Councilman Michael J. Knapp has withdrawn his proposal to move the Planning Board to Rockville, ensuring that its headquarters will remain in Silver Spring.

Knapp pulled back his plan after a lengthy debate Tuesday with his colleagues during which it became evident that his proposal would not get the five votes necessary for approval.

Last week, the council seemed evenly split on the proposal, with Councilman Michael L. Subin (D-At large) of Gaithersburg as the only undecided council member. But early in Tuesday's discussion, Subin said he would vote against the motion, effectively killing Knapp's proposal.

"We are far down the road of beginning the project, and I believe we need to respect our prior decision," Subin said. "I believe this [proposal] will be far too disruptive to the workforce there."

By withdrawing the motion, the new headquarters complex, a mixed-use development called

SilverPlace that was approved in fiscal 2004, remains on track. The development will include the agency's offices as well as about 100 affordable housing units and a park. A planning committee has selected three teams to design the project, with construction scheduled to begin next year and be completed in 2009.

Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown, whose constituents uncovered the Clarksburg planning debacle last year, said his

Tempers explode

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proposal was based on accessibility to the agency for most county residents and stemmed from council discussions on use of county office space, master plan implementation and future development.

He also cited a 2000 census report that listed the 1600 block of Gude Drive in Rockville as the county's population center.

Knapp's decision to withdraw his motion was the right one, Planning Board Chairman Derrick P. Berlage said Tuesday.

"We focused on the facts and the facts were clear. This is a partnership that has been years in the making," Berlage said. "I think we were able to show the

council that we had done our homework on this, and the motion was withdrawn."

He estimated that the agency has spent almost \$1 million on SilverPlace. Knapp's proposal would have meant a two-year delay, restarting the development process and millions of dollars more, Berlage told the council.

Before Tuesday, the council had been evenly split, with Nancy M. Floreen, Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg and Howard A. Denis (R-Dist. 1) of Chevy Chase supporting Knapp.

Knapp and Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park, who originally supported the proposal, pointed to a need for better oversight of the planning agency, which both said could have been done better with its headquarters in the Rockville core.

George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park, Thomas E. Perez (D-Dist. 5) of Takoma Park, Marilyn J. Praisner and Steven A. Silverman (D-At large) of Silver Spring opposed the proposal. They said a move to Rockville would hurt Silver Spring's economy and send the wrong message to its residents.

Discussion of Knapp's proposal was closely watched by members of the Silver Spring Chamber of Commerce who attended Tuesday's session. Last week Chamber Chairwoman



SUSAN WHITNEY-WILKERSON/THE GAZETTE

The Montgomery County Planning Board will remain at its Silver Spring site now that a proposal to move the agency to Rockville has been dropped.

Carmen Camacho called Knapp's proposal a "betrayal to Silver Spring."

Some of the opponents, including Praisner (D-Dist. 4) of Calverton, countered the accessibility argument by pointing out that advances in technology

allow residents better access to agency documents via the Internet.

Berlage and other Park and Planning officials seemed to convince some of Knapp's supporters — including Floreen — with the suggestion that satellite

centers could be opened around the county to make their work more accessible to more residents.

At the council's request, Berlage will return in a few weeks with concrete plans for the satellite centers.